

Allan Hopkins (1857 – 1933)

In Christchurch, Allan Hopkins had a career which took him from the shadows to riches and, after a spectacular crash, back into obscurity.

When his children asked him about his origins, Allan replied airily that he was born at 'Knock Castle', was 'the seventh son of a seventh son and born on New Year's Day'. In reality, William Allan Hopkins was born at Cheadle, Staffordshire, England, on 31 December 1857, the son of John Hopkins and Mary Hopkins née Allan. He was baptised at St Giles' Catholic church, Cheadle, which had been designed by famed architect Augustus Pugin. Despite this and the fact that he would describe his father as a contractor, he was nothing more than the second to youngest in a large struggling Irish family; a family indistinguishable from many others which, both before and after the potato famine, emigrated to England in search of work. Early on, the younger Hopkins jettisoned the 'William' and adopted the Irish custom of using, as his Christian name, his mother's maiden name. Throughout his life, he was known as Allan Hopkins.

In youth, Allan may have lived the harsh life of a ship's cabin boy. Certainly, in 1881, he emigrated to Canterbury on the *Lady Jocelyn*. Boldly, the Catholic lad made himself known to a fellow passenger, a 17-year-old Wesleyan girl, Sarah Ann Roebuck, who was on a tour with her father and step-mother. William Roebuck, a woollen manufacturer, consented to his daughter's engagement and, on 11 February 1882, at the Durham Street Methodist church, the young couple were married. In May, in an attempt to secure his daughter's future, William purchased property in association with his new son-in-law. Over a period of 16 years, seven children were born to Sarah and Allan: Serena or Scyrena, Luther, Daisy, Gertrude, Millicent, Dora and Allan junior.

Allan dwelt at Madras Street and Office Road and worked as a builder, contractor and commission agent. By 1892 he was a 'House, Land and Estate Agent, Valuator and Land Broker' in Cathedral Square Chambers, a small rectangular building at 8 Cathedral Square. He was also at 133 Hereford Street. Adjacent to Allan's business was the Bank of New Zealand. Allan leased but never owned this central city property.

The Staffordshire lad enjoyed the trappings of status, including membership of the Masonic Lodge and, from about 1912, the position of Justice of the Peace. It is surprising therefore that, in August 1889, he purchased 27 acres of sandy country in remote North New Brighton. Some of the land was on the south side of Travis Road in the area of the modern Wattle Drive but the larger block was to the north-east of the present Bower Avenue roundabout. This was considered 'not... a safe... but [rather]... a speculative district [with] neither beauty nor attraction'. The homestead, 'Saltaire', on five acres to the north of Allan's initial purchase, became 'a showplace in the desert'. A land valuer would one day write that Allan's improvements would 'to most people... be money spent without discretion'. However, even he had to concede: 'The grounds, certainly, are artistic'.

In the early days, visitors knew they were nearing 'Saltaire' when, at the corner of Racecourse Road (Bower Avenue) and Marriotts Road, they came upon a lamp stand which Allan had taken it upon himself to erect. When the original wooden structure was vandalised, Allan replaced it with a concrete stand. Throughout the years that the Hopkins family was domiciled at 'Saltaire', there lived with them Sarah's maternal uncle, Matthew Henry Elam. For some time, it was Matthew's job to light the lamp. A long asphalt drive wound up to the red pine rusticated weatherboard house which stood on a three



Sarah and Allan Hopkins



'Saltaire', North New Brighton

foot rise and, over time, expanded from a modest to a substantial dwelling. There were six chimneys, a fireplace in each of the 10 big rooms, a washbasin in every bedroom and a large reception hall.

At 'Saltaire', a 450 feet deep artesian well brought up water which was pumped into three 400 gallon tanks. Several thousand feet of piping ran to all parts of the grounds, 'taps being everywhere'.

'Saltaire' had a double septic tank and conveniences inside and out. At that time the nightcart came to most houses; one unfortunate young man, Willie Harper, was killed by a runaway vehicle. The property included a bee farm, tennis court, fern grotto, rockeries, flag pole and pond or swimming pool. Substantial brick outbuildings included a dairy, washhouse, storeroom, fruit house and dwellings for the gardener and Matthew Elam; the latter was banished from the main dwelling because he smoked. There were motor garages, cars and a chauffeur. Allan, who did not drive, bullied his daughter, Millicent, into learning. She thus became an early and enthusiastic exponent of what was considered a male skill.

On the Racecourse Road frontage there was a macrocarpa hedge which grew thick, wide and high and served as a very effective windbreak. A great quantity of soil was laid on the developed land. This, and the fact that there was an excellent drainage system, meant that there could be established lawns, summer houses, strawberry beds, choice flowers and a kitchen garden. Orchards, a feature of 'Saltaire', produced walnuts, cherries, pears, peaches, Japanese plums and apples. The fruit was appreciated not only by the Hopkins family but also by the denizens of the humble dwellings beyond the estate. Mothers had but to whisper 'It's apple-jelly time' and their offspring would be off clambering into the trees at 'Saltaire' and plundering large amounts of fruit.

A word on the naming of the property. Sir Titus Salt, wool stapler, had discovered how to manufacture alpaca from the wool of the long-haired South American cameloid. Outside Bradford, in Yorkshire's West Riding, he found a valley where the river Aire flowed at the foot of great hills and there established the 'ugly solid town of Saltaire with its huge mill overshadowing all... chapel, library and hospital'. However, with excellent housing and a drainage system which militated against the scourges of cholera and typhoid, Saltaire was, for its time, a model work-place. Allan Hopkins may have laboured at Saltaire. Alternately, the name may have been chosen because Sarah had been born near 'the happiest... healthiest working community in the world' and because her father, like Titus Salt, was in the textile industry.

Allan was ebullient and possessed of a sense of humour. He once came home and held his wife's friends spellbound with an account of his experiences that day. It was all quite fanciful but 'they all looked so miserable I thought I would cheer them up'.

Despite an explosive temper, he was a loving husband and father; Dora, the beauty of the family, was his favourite. Quick to make use of new technology, he installed electric lighting in the house and outbuildings and became the first private telephone subscriber in North New Brighton. Not for him the public telephone which was installed in Bowhill Road in 1916, nor the party line which six small-time businessmen had linked to their houses three years later. The budding magnate was a cheerful supporter of good causes, including, in his own area, the North Beach Surf Club. Should he see a barefoot boy, he would take him to a shop and fit him out with boots.

If Allan played the squire, Sarah was very much his lady. Quiet, dignified and elegantly dressed, she was also educated, rigidly honest, a regular churchgoer and a good housekeeper and cook. In the words of a granddaughter, she had 'not a great sense of humour, perhaps, but one can't have everything'. As in other big houses, local girls acted as servants

and were called to their duties through a system of buzzers. When courting, the servants would bring their young men to be approved by their mistress.

Allan was keen to be involved in the development of his area. In 1887 the New Brighton Tramway Company established a direct route from the city to the pier site via what is now Pages Road. The following year Allan was elected to a committee which aimed 'to secure the opening up of the roads in North New Brighton'. Later he promoted a financially shaky competitor to the New Brighton tramway venture, the City and Suburban Tramway Company, whose line left Manchester Street, meandered through Richmond, Burwood and North New Brighton and then ran down the Esplanade (Marine Parade) to the pier. So eager were the directors to grasp monies from available sources that they tried to persuade the Avon Road Board clerk to look for faults in the construction of the line not from his trap but from the back of a moving tram. Said the clerk: 'I... will be able to see all the defects in your line quite as well from my gig as from your tram'.

It was Allan who introduced to the under-capitalised venture prominent contractor John Brightling. Brightling completed the horse tramway in 1894 and bought it the following year. Nevertheless, the journey, 'tiresome, tedious, long and lumbering' and including 'a climb over great sandhills', remained 'one to be taken only by the most robust'. On the Esplanade, lupin and marram grass did not yet keep back the sea or stabilise the sand. Saltwater encroached on to the track and wind-blown sand covered the rails to a foot overnight. Thus did the driver have to carry two shovels and, with willing passengers, clear the way to the pier.

In 1906 the Christchurch Tramway Board purchased the line and, on economic grounds, abandoned the section beyond Burwood. Allan chaired an indignation meeting at the New Brighton Racecourse and led a deputation to the board. North New Brighton residents were, he said, suffering 'complete isolation ... and the virtual confiscation of a large amount of

their property'. This protest was a failure.

In January 1908, Allan led a deputation to the New Brighton Borough Council concerning a tramway stopping place, 'Brooklyn' on Racecourse Road. The name honoured Harry Mace who had died in 1902 and whose 'Brooklyn Lodge' had been at the New Brighton Racecourse (now Queen Elizabeth II Park). The deputation wanted the erstwhile stopping place given a name which was a variant of the name of Allan's property - 'Saltair'. It also wanted the eastern end of Bowhill Road to be styled 'Saltair Beach'. Neither name has survived. A by-way, Saltaire Street, still exists.

In October 1910 the area was threatened. A huge fire sprang up at North New Brighton. Fanned by 'one of the strongest nor'west winds ever experienced in Canterbury', the inferno 'raged through the dry grass and undergrowth, sweeping away everything in front of it'. At 'Saltair', Dora Hopkins fled the house with her most treasured possession, a blue velvet evening cloak. The fernery, trees and shrubs were engulfed but the abundance of water, use of a manual machine and the presence of over 500 volunteers in the area meant that the house could be saved. The fire moved on through Rawhiti Domain and, though it was there checked, many of the residents of central Brighton evacuated their houses. A journalist wrote:

'...The scene in Lonsdale Street was a weird one... the atmosphere... yellow, vast clouds rendered everything indistinct, and everywhere were heaped piles of furniture thrown pell-mell into the road. Pianos jostled pots and pans and everywhere there was confusion.'

Gradually a working class and petit bourgeois settlement was established in North New Brighton. A journalist enthused about how on each side of Bowhill Road could be seen 'dwellings nestling amongst shrubs and trees... the gardens in the sand producing flowers and vegetables... of surpassing excellence'. On the beach Amy Alley gathered driftwood, built a fire and fed her numerous nieces and nephews, the famous



Dora Hopkins

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Rewi among them. When not thus engaged, she laid broom on her section, irrigated it and saw her sandhill blossom with ice plants and geraniums. Meanwhile future Mayor of New Brighton Ernest Leaver¹ was establishing the North New Brighton Burgesses' Association at 'Uncle Tom's Cabin', a shop and tea-rooms which, like 'Saltaire', had been threatened by the 1910 fire. The bourgeois pressure group succeeded where the squire had failed. The board extended the tramline to the beach and, in September 1914, electrified the route all the way to the pier.

To Allan and Sarah, the possession of a beautiful home, status and a measure of clout were as nothing when compared with the family tragedies which they experienced. In 1893 their daughter, Daisy, aged eight, succumbed to a chest abscess, while Serena, 29, died of tubercular meningitis in 1912. Dora, 26, 'a pretty girl but never far from her bed', died of pulmonary tuberculosis, in 1920. The trio lie in the Burwood Anglican churchyard. Another daughter, Gertrude Gresham, was to outlive her father by but four years, dying in 1937. Outstanding among the siblings was Allan junior, 'a man of gay and happy disposition', a skilled surgeon, and, moreover, 'tactful and agreeable in his dealings with patients and nurses'. In 1931, aged 34, he fell victim to diphtheria in the institution at which he was surgeon and medical superintendent, Westland Hospital, Hokitika.

Allan Hopkins was a prominent Christchurch personality. To many he was a businessman of excellent reputation; was there not on his office wall the poem which began, 'I shall pass this way but once'? People entrusted to him the management of their affairs. He financed some into homes, demanding only small deposits and advancing money on first and second mortgages. To speculators, he was the promoter of companies. Among them were the Imperial Oilskin, British Distillate and Rangitoto Estate companies, the last being involved with the leasing of North Island Maori land.

Allan took his wife and daughters on sea voyages to Europe in 1911 and 1914; Millicent was delighted to hear the tenor

Caruso, and see the dancer Nijinsky. Then came crises. The older son, Luther, a lawyer, was honorary treasurer of the Canterbury Rowing Club and a member of the New Brighton Trotting Club. However, in his father's absence, he proved a poor manager of the real estate agency. There was a rash of law suits and back-sliding mortgagees, deposits were withdrawn and bank support denied.

In February 1921, with his health deteriorating, Allan executed a private deed of assignment over the whole of his property for the benefit of his creditors. One trustee, George Thomas Booth of the agricultural machinery firm Booth Macdonald, was the father-in-law of Millicent Hopkins. However, on 22 April a determined old woman, Mary Anne Edwards, had Allan adjudged bankrupt and his property came under the control of the Official Assignee. Finding life at 'Saltaire' intolerable, Sarah Hopkins joined her Gresham daughter and son-in-law in Wellington. An anecdote has Allan walking the streets of Christchurch, accompanied by an Airedale dog, and being pursued by his creditors. Certainly he entered Sunnyside Asylum as a voluntary boarder before joining his family in the capital.

The bankruptcy focused public attention on the details of Allan's activities. At Awamonga near Balclutha, the land agent had shown bad judgment. Tenants who harvested 'one of the best crops of oats it was possible to grow' were harshly treated and abandoned to idleness potentially 'tip-top sheep country'. On other occasions there had been criminality. Allan had used the account of the Imperial Oilskin Company as his own; thus was the business sent into liquidation. Matthew Elam had acted as Allan's nominee, allowing the land agent to hide his involvement in various concerns; he would 'simply sign anything put before him'. With Allan's bankruptcy, the old man shook off his lethargy and turned over to the Official Assignee all the properties and shares which were nominally his.

In October 1921 Allan awaited sentence in the Supreme Court. The Crown Prosecutor stated that the defalcations

amounted to £22,000 though the Official Assignee would one day put the debts at £46,000. Nevertheless, Allan pleaded guilty to but four charges of failing to account for sums involving some £1700.

Invoking Section 142 of the Crimes Act, the judge imposed a sentence of four years' hard labour on each charge, the sentences to be served concurrently.

The mainstream media gave extensive coverage to the case. *New Zealand truth*, journal of the groundlings, exulted over the fall of the 'Holy City' land broker who, with his 'big private establishment and... big office in the city... did things – and his clients – in a big way'. Creditors who were 'aggrieved [and] vindictive' sought household items large and small which they believed to have been carried off by the family. With her usual quiet dignity, Sarah Hopkins told the Official Assignee that a large heavy box which had been removed from the North New Brighton property 'contained the belongings of my two girls who are dead'; that family deaths and marriages meant that most blankets were 'over 20 years old... much worn and not numerous'; and that her china and silver presents would be useful 'if ever I can have a little house of my own again'.

In 1925 Matthew Elam died at 'Tuarangi' or, as it was more starkly described, the Old Men's Home, Ashburton. Allan was released from Papanui Prison on 15 November 1923 and returned to Wellington. In August 1933, he suffered a stroke while sitting at his desk. The stroke, and arteriosclerosis, brought about his death, on 15 August, at Brougham Street Hospital; there was no obituary. Allan was buried in the Karori Cemetery.

Sarah accompanied her Booth daughter and son-in-law to Sydney where, in World War II, she knitted hundreds of pairs of khaki socks and showed less skilled women how to turn a heel. In 1949 the family moved to London where Sarah died, at 90, in 1954.

Allan Hopkins had a fresh complexion, blue eyes and was of average height. Of abstemious habits, he led an exemplary home life. Nevertheless, the 'helpless... ignorant' working people who had entrusted their life savings to him remembered his fraud – especially when, in 1939 and 1952, they received their pay-out, the total dividend being 7 29/80 of a penny in the pound. For years the grand house reminded them of the defalcations. Even when Redemptorist priests had it demolished, the homestead property remained. In the year 2000 the fathers are planning to move out. Should the land be subdivided, the chief evidence of North New Brighton's flawed magnate will disappear.

¹ Ernest Leaver was the younger brother of Richard Leaver junior. Richard married Hannah, daughter of Maria Vennell.



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